Disability, Gender, and Innocence

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Disability, Gender, and Innocence: Russ Meyer's *Mudhoney* and *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* and Problems of Signification in Cinema

As Slavoj Žižek observed, the interpretation of film must be approached "in the way one has to interpret a Chinese political poem: absences and surprising presences count" (125). The same is true of the "deviant" body and for the body out of place. Disability weaves its way through cinema and culture in multifarious, and often unexpected, forms. There have been various efforts to theorize disability and cinema – though, immediately, we must distinguish between theorizing disability in cinema and an attempt to produce a more general theory of disability and cinema. For the most part, these efforts have come from disability studies, rather than cinema studies, gender studies, semiotics, or sociology, although these areas of study inform them to greater or lesser degrees.

This chapter will look at the narrative construction and deployment of three characters with disabilities from two films by exploitation moviemaker Russ Meyer: *Mudhoney* (1965) and *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1966), in order to explore the various ways in which different impairments link with gender, sexuality, and moral culpability, avoiding a simplistic assessment of these representations as one-dimensional, and revealing their complex semiotic structure. The ultimate purpose of this is to consider the vexed question of signification and the body, particularly the disabled body, building on the seminal contribution by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder of the concept of "narrative prosthesis" (*Narrative Prosthesis* 15), which has already been addressed in the chapter written by Dan Goodley and Marek Mackiewicz. This article takes disability studies as its starting point, though its purpose is not

to produce or contribute to a general theory of disability in cinema, but to critique monolithic approaches. The key contribution of the chapter is to demonstrate, through the application of basic elements of semiotics, that it is rarely meaningful or useful to consider characters with specific body differences as "representing" disability. In other words, the chapter will demonstrate that abnormal bodies rarely, if ever, signify disability as an entire category or paradigm. Also, it will highlight the paradox of considering corporeal difference as representing abstract concepts whilst simultaneously taking those very concepts as signifiers of that non-standard embodiment. Of course, within a complex economy of signs it is likely that all elements will perform multiple functions as signifying and signified components. However, it is precisely this infinitely mutually sustaining nature of language that highlights the impossibility of a meaningful, yet entirely self-contained, sign. By assuming a broadly post-Saussurean semiotic approach based on a dyadic,[1] complex, and arbitrary model of signs (cf. Deely), the analysis will show that bodily difference itself generally performs the function of signifier, and that the interplay of disability, gender, and age in the signification of moral coding, highlights the error of privileging any one corporeal dimension as a narrative signifier.

At this point, it is worth making a few comments on the theoretical orientation of the chapter. First, the study considers the "overdetermination" of corporeal signification, wherein a wide range of semi-autonomous factors, none of which is uniquely causal or essential, contribute to the production of signs. This avoids reductive approaches to the films' symbolic systems focused on any single dimension, or regarding them separately – deformed, deviant and hypersexualized bodies, as well as cars, music, and dusty landscapes all play a part, and even the emphasis in this chapter on corporeal signs is driven purely by present interest and not because they are discrete. Overdetermination is understood in two distinct ways in

[1] Semiotics involves the division of signs into two, sometimes three, component parts. In the dyadic model, taken here, a sign can be theoretically divided into a 'signifier' – a written or spoken word, a symbol, a picture – and the *concept* that is 'signified'. Triadic approaches also include actual material 'objects' being referred to.

semiotics. Firstly, there is the overdetermination of the sign itself and its existence *qua* sign, that is to say, the production of a sign through the repetition of a range of symbolic and non-symbolic factors results in a signifier capable of sustaining a signified concept such that the sign can be used in symbolic exchange. Floyd Merrell locates this understanding of overdetermination in Peircean semiotics, identifying it with the very earliest stage of sign formation: a "pre-Firstness, [or] pure vagueness, before there is consciousness *of* a sign" (35). For Merrell, then, overdetermination refers to a stage before intersecting flows, marks, and exclusions achieve the degree of stability necessary for meaningful signs to emerge. The formation of signs is perhaps more akin to a primordial evolution from a range of random and arbitrary conditions than it is to a clear and restricted causal determination by those conditions. For the purposes of this analysis, then, "overdetermination" is taken more in a Freudian-inspired sense to refer to the *accomplishment* of signs through the repetition of multiple and varied linguistic and non-linguistic moments, avoiding recourse to accounts of causality completely. The second consideration, then, is implicit in the first, and that is to understand the functioning of signs themselves as factors in the overdetermination of other signs and practices. To put it simply, all signs affect the production and meaning of other signs within the same context. Understanding the semiotics of the films, therefore, demands attention to the relationality of signs and their interplay within and beyond symbolic systems. The analysis of disability in the two films considered here must also attend to gender, the mise-en-scène, the revving of car engines and of libidos, since everything contributes to the films' overall excessive symbolic economies. However, the cinematic audience must be culturally and linguistically pre-prepared for the signs, if not their precise arrangement, before the films even begin if they are not to be overwhelmed by the production of new signs. For this reason, the chapter has two main points of focus. The first of these is to look at how

the films recapitulate the production of familiar signs, and the second is to analyze how the films' corporeal signs contribute to overdetermination.

This approach contrasts sharply with the dominant emphasis on *representation*, as opposed to signification, in the study of disability and cinema. Most commonly there are interrogations of how film and other cultural media use disability as a physical or narrative representation of moral concepts, with the implication that this morality, in turn, becomes socially definitive for disabled people. Benjamin Fraser's recent collection on *Cultures of Representation: Disability in World Cinema* is a case in point, with none of the chapters adopting a semiotic approach.

In the case of director, Russ Meyer, best known for his work in "exploitation" cinema, although an undoubted auteur and innovator, the corporeal emphasis for which he is most commonly remembered is his highly sexist use of pneumatic female actors. His films were generally low budget and, whilst aimed at the grindhouse market, have become cult classics in many cases. There have been a number of studies of his films, although there has not been any real exploration of his portrayal of characters with disabilities, and this is precisely where the focus of this chapter is directed. These portrayals rely heavily, if implicitly, on social normativity in order to produce fantastical, queered landscapes of grotesques and bizarre beings. As Susan Flynn observes,

> Hollywood celebrates normativity as the oil that greases the wheels of progress and thus utilises difference as a narrative tool. The body is used as the terrain on which the battle for power and autonomy is fought. Films replete with the threat of danger take us on a journey of cinematic escapism, which facilitates our release from "imperfect" bodies… (6)

The relevance of cinematic presentations of impaired and deviant bodies is, therefore, of central importance, not merely for disabled people, but for all. Film contributes to the biopolitical governance of human life, and, as a result, becomes a site of resistance to it.

Eula

The first character the chapter will discuss is that of Eula, played by Rena Horten, who appears in *Mudhoney*, released in 1965. Set in Prohibition-era Missouri, the story takes place in the small town of Spooner through which the film's protagonist, Calif McKinney (John Furlong), is travelling en route to California, carrying a secret from his past, namely that he accidentally killed a strike-breaker in a fight. Instead, he finds love in the arms of the wife of the film's villain, Sidney Brenshaw (played superbly by Hal Hopper).

Eula is the deaf-mute[2] sister of Clara Belle (Lorna Maitland), and daughter of Maggie Marie (Princess Livingston), who runs a brothel and drinking den in which the two daughters are apparently the only prostitutes. What makes Eula most interesting is that she is seemingly completely unaware of the social world around her – the context, morality, and implications of what she does. Moral dissipation and turpitude surrounds Eula, whilst she remains innocent throughout.

Though much of the depravity centers on, or is in keeping with, her own sexually promiscuous behavior, Eula is protected from its significance because she is presented as lacking in the comprehension of language. She hears and speaks no evil, and that which she sees she is unable to recognize as such. Language is presented as the medium necessary for the transformation of amoral natural proclivities into social acts, capable of being judged against moral codes. If Eula can read, we have no clue about this, and it would seem disruptive of the moral texture of the narrative if she could. She is a child of nature – a fact

[2] I use this term to emphasise a literary trope, rather than any actual embodied existence.

signified at several points by her play with a kitten – physically present in the social world, but simultaneously absent from it because she is outside of the linguistic community.

Nowhere is Eula's pre-linguistic state of moral purity made clearer than when the film's protagonist, Calif McKinney goes to visit Maggie Marie's house. In the scene, we find Calif drinking homemade spirits. Touching the record player beside him, Eula is sensing the vibrations of a Strauss waltz through her fingers, standing in a state of ecstatic reverie with her eyes closed – further focusing her senses on touch. Calif seems captivated by her. Though it is not Eula he loves – Calif has already fallen for Brenshaw's wife, Hannah (Antoinette Cristiani) – he is transported by her appearance. Calif takes Eula's hand and holds it to his throat whilst he hums the waltz himself. She smiles, feeling the vibrations. Somewhat drunk, he then dances with her around the room, an expansive and energetic waltz, before collapsing backwards through the bead-string door and onto her bed laughing. Eula pauses at the door, halfway through the strings of beads, which hang around her face and neck, before following him. She begins to undress Calif, before taking off her own dress and standing before him naked, completely lacking in self-consciousness, which the camera captures from Calif's perspective. Eula is unembarrassed by the spectator, which is to say the audience who occupy Calif's position. The vulgar intrusion of Brenshaw then interrupts the scene.

The dance itself is a curious spectacle. Whatley notes that, "A condition of 'otherness' associated with disabled people tends to be emphasized by pairing disabled with nondisabled dancers" (50). However, as the music continues and the dancers move around the room, we forget that Eula is neither hearing the music, nor picking up its vibrations. For that moment, the scene effectively normalizes Eula for the audience.

As the scene moves from the public room to the bedroom, Calif's disposition changes in a way we would perhaps expect. Moving from his initial captivation, his happiness changes from the *joie de vivre* exhibited whilst dancing, to the seriousness of carnal

anticipation captured in close-up, and, finally, to embarrassment and anger towards his tormentor, Brenshaw, which is again highlighted in a facial close-up. For Eula, however, the scene plays very differently. Whilst, again, she fails to register Brenshaw's malevolent derision, mainly directed at Calif, the more interesting aspect is the way in which, for her, the movement of the scene, from her initial euphoria to the bedroom scene, is almost completely seamless. Eula does not move, as Calif does, from a higher state of joy to a baser plane of animal desire and then anger. For her, it is all one, a continuous state of serene happiness, interrupted only by surprise at the intrusion of Brenshaw – for whom she does, curiously, cover her breasts, though not her pubic area. The bead curtain door, which is all that separates the public room from her bedroom, also highlights this continuity. The divisions of visibility that generally mark the social world do not exist for Eula, since they rest on knowledge of privacy and shame, and Eula knows neither.

Eula finally has her innocence and, as a telling marker, her silence, shattered at the end of the film. Confirming her status as a child of nature, Eula, again playing with the kitten, somehow senses violence unfolding in the town, though she can neither see nor hear it, as the lynch-mob closes in on the increasingly desperate and mad Brenshaw. Running to the scene, her lack of comprehension of human violence and brutality is brought to an abrupt end with the sight of the preacher, Brother Hansen (Frank Bolger), kicking a barrel from beneath the feet of the noosed Brenshaw. The sight of the hanged Brenshaw requires no linguistic intercession to make her aware of the viciousness of the townspeople. She utters her only sound as the film closes around her scream.

Eula's deafness isolates her from the moral corruption that immerses her. Her sexuality is an active one, which is conspicuous in the fact that she follows, without inhibition, her natural proclivities and desires, also she is very assertive in approaching men with whom she wishes to copulate. However, it is also passively feminine in that her place is

to *receive*, however willingly, aggressive male sexuality. A reversal almost happens in *Faster Pussycat!* with the case of a male character with intellectual disability, where seduction is attempted by a sexually aggressive woman. However, this cannot come to fruition precisely because, ultimately, he fails in his manhood.

Despite her amorality, or, rather, because of it, Eula's body is even more publically displayed than her sister's is. Her bra-less cleavage reaching almost to the navel is constantly on display, except when she is completely naked. Even when showering outside, Eula only smiles at the arrival of the leering Brenshaw and the apocalyptic puritan, Brother Hansen, making no effort to cover her nudity. Lacking the language to formulate the basis for embarrassment herself, the viewer is to understand that Eula is unable to comprehend either Brenshaw's odious lust, or Hansen's hypocritical seething moral condemnation. Whilst Eula is undoubtedly presented as the Other, it would be too simplistic to call it an "inferiority" and there is no obvious narrative desire to restore "an originary wholeness [or] to institute a notion of the body within a regime of tolerable deviance" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 6-7). Instead, her body as signifier is much more complex, with gender, beauty, sensuality, deafness and so forth, all contributing to its overdetermination,, as we shall see below.

The Old Man and the Vegetable

The other two characters appear in Meyer's next, and arguably best (McDonough 175-76; Waters 42), film, *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*, released in 1966. The film, which has become something of a post-feminist cultural icon, centers on the rampaging exploits of three go-go dancers, led by the curvaceous and deadly Varla (Tura Satana). Having kidnapped a young socialite, Linda (Susan Bernard), after dispatching her insipid boyfriend, the trio wind up on a broken down ranch with the lure of hidden money. The ranch is inhabited by "the Old Man"

(Stuart Lancaster, who also appeared in *Mudhoney* and numerous other Meyer movies) and his two sons, Kirk (Paul Trinka), the elder son, and his younger son, known only as "the Vegetable" (Dennis Busch).

We get our first proper introduction to both the Vegetable and the Old Man as they sit at the kitchen table. Like Eula, the Vegetable is playing with a kitten when we first meet him. The scene emphasizes both his musculature and gentleness. He is redolent of Frankenstein's monster in his play, and the spectacle balances on the cusp of horror in the stark contrast between his gentle play and his muscular frame, which could crush the kitten in an instant. The Old Man injects sufficient menace into the proceedings to make the viewer consider that as a serious possibility.

The Vegetable has some kind of intellectual disability, which ultimately is the source of his innocence, but, unlike Eula, he has some degree of knowledge of right and wrong – though not enough for autonomous moral existence. His pliability and knowledge, albeit conflicted, of his wrongdoing in the brutalization of young women at his father's behest lead ultimately to a redemption that demands a trade with his freedom, as Kirk lovingly assures him of institutional care. Language as a mark of moral culpability also features for the Vegetable. For the most part, he says little and when he does, his words falter.

Entirely different to Eula, the Vegetable seems almost asexual, despite being a model of masculine physical perfection. When Varla and Rosie (Haji), another gang member and Varla's lover, strike provocative poses, the Vegetable munches unconcernedly on an apple, awaiting his next instructions from the Old Man. Later, as Billie (Lori Williams), the third of the Amazonian outlaws, tries to seduce him, he seems more intent on his weight training, almost uncomprehending of Billie's intentions. In both psychophysiological and Butlerian senses, he is unable to *perform* a masculine sexuality, and has no "gender coherence" (Butler

24). The Vegetable has no existence other than as a functional extension of his father and an object of Billie's lust until the film's final scenes.

The Old Man is a wheelchair user, with a violent unyielding misogyny fueling his psyche following an incident in which he acquired his impairment helping a young woman to board a moving train. The film makes various allusions to the Old Man, aided by the Vegetable, inflicting sexual violence on young women. As the Old Man says, "When you hurt somebody the authorities get aroused. But what do they know about hurting and pain? We're payin' 'em back, boy. Each woman, a payment." The Old Man has a contradictory relationship towards the Vegetable. On the one hand, he is completely dependent upon him for all his physical needs, including the acquisition of women. At the same time, he loathes and resents him, not only for his dependence upon him, but because his wife died giving birth to him. Though never to his face, the Old Man is open to others about the contempt he has for his younger son, "a blob of flesh."

We see the Old Man's raging madness finally boiling over as the Vegetable gives chase to the escaping Linda. The Old Man clambers out of the truck and starts dragging himself towards the low angled static camera, and to where the Vegetable has caught up with the screaming victim. The Old Man is simultaneously powerful in his violence, and his ability to exercise it through his son, and emasculated and pathetic, heaving himself through the dust towards his prey, against whom he would be completely ineffectual on his own. Central to his character throughout the movie is his impaired sense of agency, which is limited by his dependence on others, a point that Tom Shakespeare believes to be common to disabled characters in cinema (58-69). The landscape through which he crawls is as barren, fruitless, and terrifying as he is. As he steadily bears down on the camera, and thus the audience, he shouts maniacally to his son, egging him on:

The Old Man: C'mon boy let's get her. Don't let her get away this time.

C’mon boy, we know what to do now, just like before.

That’s it boy. We got her now.

Go on boy, get her, get her!

Don’t let her scream, and get something in her mouth. Hit her head, boy. Tell her yer daddy is paid, boy.

In his moment of need, the repudiation of his son vanishes. The Old Man is completely dependent on the Vegetable to form a fully functioning, sexually violent unit.

By this point, Linda has capitulated. With the camera alternating between the Vegetable’s perspective above her – showing the tired and pained resignation in her face – to low camera shots from behind Linda and the Vegetable’s menacing frame hulking towards her, Linda says: “Go ahead. I don’t care. Get it over with. Just leave me alone. Leave me alone.” It is at this point that the Vegetable finally breaks down and some innate sense of right and wrong takes over, superseding the authority and instructions of the Old Man. Covering his face with his fists, he begins to cry, then, dropping to his knees and putting his hands then head on Linda’s thigh just as Kirk arrives:

The Vegetable: I can’t do it.

I… I… I… I don’t mean to

I’m… sorry

Kirk: Easy brother, everything’s going to be alright.

You’re doing fine, you’re doing just fine.

The Vegetable: I’m sorry

you… believe me?

I… don’t know.

nothing… right

nothing’s ever right.

Kirk: You're going to be alright.

The co-dependence between the Old Man and the Vegetable is irreparably broken. The Old Man looks on disgusted, still lying in the desert sand.

The shifting of the camera perspective from behind Linda, looking up at the Vegetable, to the Vegetable's perspective looking down directly mirrors that of Eula and Calif in the bedroom. However, where the Vegetable's intellectual disability and masculine body create a terrifying sexual menace, Eula's deafness and feminine form produce a powerful allure. Linda surrenders, resigned to her defeat, and Calif surrenders willingly to Eula's charms. Only by introducing a pathological female hypersexuality, in the form of Varla and company, does Meyer encourage the audience to contemplate a reversal of the gender roles in the first scenario. A reversal in the second would be virtually impossible.

Im/moral bodies

For the Vegetable, then, his intellectual disability diminishes his moral culpability, but although, like Eula, he is unable to formulate moral precepts, he demonstrates an innate sense of right and wrong at the end. Unlike Eula, however, he is forced to recognize the wrongness of his own actions, and he is required to perform various redemptive acts: demonstrating sorrow, killing Rosie (whom he appears to blame for the death of Billie), battling Varla, and accepting institutionalization.

Impairments aside, whilst both the Vegetable and Eula embody, and are presented as, ideals of masculine and feminine bodily perfection, the Vegetable remains sexually emasculated. Although Billie's charms begin to take some effect on him, he ultimately lacks the requisite male aggression to *give* Billie the sex she desires, whereas Eula merely has to *receive* the sexual advances of men. Instead, the Vegetable allows the maddening sound of a passing train – the same train that was the source of his father's injury – to interrupt him just

as he is yielding to Billie's seduction, which is also one of the clearest signs that all of his violence is rooted in his unquestioning obedience to his father (cf. Mollow 286).

The Old Man is a more hackneyed symbol of moral decay. He has all of the carnal aggression that the Vegetable lacks, coupled with a deep-seated lust for violent revenge against women, and, in this respect, he embodies what Shakespeare refers to as the cultural linkage of "sexuality with disability, and sexuality with mortality" (59). It is of no consequence that his body became impaired during an act of helping; he is the architect of his own inescapable judgment. Although thoroughly rooted in his impairment, the Old Man has chosen a life of hatred: to hold all women responsible for what happened to him, to blame his younger son for his wife's death, and to use him as an instrument for his malevolent designs.

Of the three, only the Old Man and, as a signifier, his broken body, are presented as morally and physically repellent. The hidden nature of Eula's and the Vegetable's impairments mean that their externally "normal" bodies can still conform to dominant aesthetic ideals of human beauty, and also highlight the linkage between physical and moral goodness – though more akin to amoral 'noble savages' than the 'civilized' goodness discussed by Goodley and Mackiewicz below. In the bedroom scene with Eula and Calif, both Calif and the audience are invited to share in the spectacle of Eula's naked body. We can see in Calif what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls the "visual magnetism of breasts [which] can make both starers and starees anxious" (143). He experiences the delicious erotic anxiety at the prospect of what is about to happen. Again, however, Eula has no such experience because her eroticism has an entirely different register. There is, however, an implicit devaluing of Eula, in that she is unwittingly a siren around whose rocks the moral wreckage of men floats. Calif is a free man, and, whilst the audience are not exactly enjoined to condemn his moment of desire for Eula, we have sympathy for his love of Brenshaw's wife and anticipate, correctly, that it is there that he will ultimately find happiness. Men have only

lust for Eula, whilst she has pure erotic desires for them, free from the moral disapprobation implied by "lust." Conversely, whilst it is not possible for others to love Eula, neither can she truly give love, condemned as she is, by her deafness, to a series of sexual couplings that cannot provide the symbolic depth necessary for a truly loving relationship. For Eula, only the viewer can (choose to) see her social oppression; she herself lacks the conceptual apparatus, and neither does she enjoy any aesthetic sensibility beyond that which gratifies her.[3]

Disability and the problem of representation

Mitchell and Snyder's work provides a clear starting point for the analysis of signification in the two films:

> Our thesis centers not simply upon the fact that people with disabilities have been the object of representational treatments, but rather that their function in literary discourse is primarily twofold: disability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device. (*Narrative Prosthesis* 47)

This leads them to assert the near ubiquity of disability in cinema and literature, on which they base their theory of "narrative prosthesis." One of the key aspects of the approach, evident here, is that the issues of oppression and resistance lie primarily in the textual reading, which always offers multiple possibilities, rather than in taking fixed positions about the nature of the texts themselves. In other words, the act of reading any text, as well as producing it, can create an act of resistance, though neither resistance nor oppression is ever fully complete. Thus, Michael T. Clarke's objection that even documentary cinema made by disabled film makers and giving direct voice to disabled people can be corrupted by the

[3] In similar vein, Jessica Berson comments on the way in which the casting of Deaf actors in female Shakespearean roles, metaphorically representing concepts and dramatic relations, has the (unintended) effect of further diminishing their agency as women (47).

internalization of ableist cinematic conventions, thereby undermining Snyder and Mitchell's position, seems to miss the point. The potential for texts to provide opportunities for the opening of new spaces for resistance to imposed subjectivities is still compatible with the continued existence of oppressive tendencies in those same texts. In fact, both continually weave themselves through texts. Narrative prosthesis, then, is as much a committed practice of critical engagement as it is a theory of how disability functions in literary and cinematic texts.

Elsewhere, Mitchell and Snyder give a useful typology, chronologically traced, of approaches to theorizing cultural representations of disability: early efforts, focused on "negative imagery;" "social realist;" a more critical "new historicist" approach, and "biographical criticism" ("Representation and its Discontents" 196, 199, 201, 205). However, there is a problem with how representation itself is being used, pointing two ways. Mitchell and Snyder outline what they regard as the three most commonly identified stereotypes of disability – Melville's Captain Ahab, Dickens' Tiny Tim, and Shakespeare's Richard III – which are used to critique the way in which disability is represented in literature. However, confusion arises because actually none of these characters *represents* disability. What they represent are moral concepts: hubris, pathos, and iniquity. To become confused on this point means pressing disability into double-facing service in relation to signification; the signifier is the specific impairment, or other bodily difference, that which is being signified is the, usually moral, concept it operates to denote. That which is signified cannot, therefore, function simultaneously as a signifier for the impairment.

In the case of Eula, her deafness is used to signify her natural state of amorality. It does not, however, follow that ingenuousness can serve to represent deafness, and nor is there any evidence that naivety is being equated with sensory impairments. Similarly, taking the specific character of Old Man with his physical impairment, his paraplegia signifies greed,

malevolence, and his vengeful hatred. Again, however, there are problems in expecting the various elements of the sign to function *simultaneously* as both signifier and signified. The Vegetable's intellectual disability is a different kind of marker to Eula's for innocence, but, nonetheless, innocence cannot *by virtue of this sign* come to signify intellectual disability, a point that would be true on either a Saussurean dyadic model, or a Peircean triadic model of the sign (Deely *passim*).

We can see a clear example of this in an early exchange between Varla and the Old Man. As they confront each other in a dialogue, the camera position switches from behind Varla, foregrounding her curvaceous hips and derriere, as the Old Man talks, and a view that foregrounds a rear-shot of his wheelchair when Varla is the interlocutor. In a visual synecdoche, the Old Man talks to Varla's hips and thighs as the literal embodiment of female sexuality, whilst Varla talks to the Old Man's wheelchair, which carries his derelict body and turns out to be the location of the hidden money, as the symbol of his depraved character. But, whilst Varla's behind signifies a wanton sexuality and the partial view of the Old Man's body and wheelchair signifies his moral corruption, those signified concepts cannot be reversed to infer those particular signifiers. The concept of dangerous femininity is not linked essentially or uniquely to the image of a woman's behind and nor is moral turpitude exhaustively and inextricably linked to wheelchair use.

However, this is a rather different point to the observation of Mitzi Walz in relation to the "looping effect" (103), in which negative, principally medical, "representations" of disability become culturally propagated, only to be internalized by disabled people themselves and reproduced in their own narratives. This looping sequence, if indeed it can be said to exist in any substantial way, does not involve self-referential signs. Furthermore, in any system of signs, multiple loops could always be found that would bring the signified back to the signifier, though the process of overdetermination, often very quickly. However, the

model of looping implies a high level of passivity on the part of spectator, disabled or otherwise, and a high degree of consistency and stability in the meaning of signs and economy of semiotic elements in order to produce this self-perpetuating looping effect.

Mitchell and Snyder discuss disability in relation to its function as "a linguistic 'signifier'" ("Representation and its Discontents" 214). However, firstly, disability *per se* is almost never a signifier, that is, as a general concept or social category, only specific characters and precise bodily differences. Moreover, in such instances, when a particular impairment or difference exists as a signifier, "disability" is rarely the concept signified. When it is the concept of "disability" that is signified, something else must act as the signifier. The question in those events is: What is representing disability? Rather than the reverse: What is disability representing? "Disability," in other words, does not represent anything, because other than as a word – written or spoken – or probably the only other example, the universally recognized, if problematic, wheelchair logo, the entirety of "disability" cannot be presented in a single character or situation. Signifiers are restricted to each unique instance of corporeal variance: Eula's deafness, the Vegetable's intellectual disability, or the Old Man's paraplegia, each of which signifies very different concepts, none of which could be interchangeable and all of which are variable even in other literary characters with similar impairments – highlighting the basic semiotic premise of the arbitrariness of the sign, i.e. the lack of a natural link between the signifier and the signified. The exact operations of signification become lost amidst less precise references to "representation." Kate Ellis renders an even more crude approach, suggesting that, "An influential social barrier for people with impairments is the representation of disability in films because cinema is a powerful cultural tool in shaping society's opinion of disability" (2). However, as noted, no single disabled character, such as Eula, can be said to *represent* disability. What Eula's body signifies is an overdetermined moral concept, or cluster of

concepts, of which her deafness forms only one part of the signifier, along with her voluptuous female body; open and active sexuality; and her plunging cleavage, when she is dressed at all. In other words, this presents us with a corporeal nexus of signification, in which disability, gender, race, and sexuality are all merely dimensions.

In fact, there is a prevalence of this kind of disordered analysis of signs in most of the literature, largely stemming from an initial focus on disability, coupled with a poorly theorized understanding of representation and signification. Angela Smith, for example, also illustrates the typical difficulties with this approach when she suggests that

> The narrative and metaphoric construction of disability in classical myth, folklore, and literature has invested certain impairments with particular symbolic meanings. Blindness, for instance, often figures an absolute helplessness or dependency. . . . Alternatively, blindness indicates, or is compensated with, inner sight and wisdom. (83)

Again, the arbitrariness, and plurality, of the sign is evident, as is the impossibility of inverting the sign to make dependency or inner sight signifiers for blindness. The meanings are being invested with "reduced" bodies, rather than the reverse.

We also need to consider whether the ways in which impaired and abnormal bodies perform signifying functions in essentially different ways to other bodies. In *Faster Pussycat!*, for example, danger does not come only from the two disabled characters; indeed, the most dangerous individuals are Varla and her two accomplices. As the opening (moral) narrator says,

> While violence cloaks itself in a plethora of disguises, its favorite mantle still remains . . . sex. Violence devours all it touches, its voracious appetite rarely fulfilled. . . . Let's examine closely that most dangerously evil creation, this new breed encased and contained in the soft suppleness of woman. The

> softness is there, the unmistakable smell of female, the surface shiny and silken, the body yielding yet wanton.

Immediately, without even seeing any flesh, the primacy of the female body as a surface for the eruption of sexual violence is established. The first scene shows the three go-go dancers at work in a nightclub, leering men egging them on; they are the first victims of ruinous feminine power. The ostensibly unimpaired bodies of the three outlaw women function as sites of signification as much as any of the three disabled characters considered here – a surface for the inscription of wanton lust and the murderous consequences of an assertive female sexuality. Similarly, Clara Belle, Eula's sister, is thoroughly aware of, and an active participant in, the monetary sale of her voluptuous body. This certainly shifts her moral status, but her body is no less involved in a signifying relationship with the moral concepts that it signifies than Eula's is. In the case of most of Meyer's women, and many of the men, corporeal difference *not* constituting disability functions in signification in precisely the same way, if for other concepts, as do abnormal bodies. The bodies of Varla and her band may be extreme, but they are by no means even *abnormal*, let alone impaired. This suggests that the recognition of the importance of the body as a site of cultural signification cannot privilege any one dimension such as disability, as Snyder and Mitchell do in claiming that, "Body genres are . . . dependent on disability as a representational device" ("Cultural Locations of Disability" 162).

Conclusion

The deployment of impaired and otherwise aberrant bodies in the two films discussed creates a tense interplay of semiotic elements. The primary signifying functions in both are performed by corporeality. However, they evince multiple and shifting relations to the moral codes that they signify. Nowhere, however, is that process of signification reversed for

corporeality itself to become the signified element. This is certainly not to suggest that body concepts cannot be signified, merely that such signification cannot be assumed to be present in every case of bodily difference, and must be established specifically.

Grindhouse cinema always had an ambiguous and contradictory relationship towards its own narratives and characters (Mathijs and Sexton 97). The nature of exploitation cinema was such that it had to be seen to condemn the very thing that it sold. This was a consistent theme since the early days of the morality films from the pre- and post-War period, such as *Reefer Madness* (dir. Louis J. Gasnier, 1936), *Sex Madness* (dir. Dwain Esper, 1938), or *Test Tube Babies* (dir. W. Merle Connell, 1948). The original title for *Mudhoney* was *Rope of Flesh*, a reference to the origins of Brenshaw's demise in his own carnality. Condemnation and denigration of wildly deviant characters, therefore, is not a straightforward matter. In this respect, grindhouse presents an ideal vehicle for the study of complex signification and corporeal deviance. It fetishizes bodily and behavioral deviance such that normalcy is safely circumvented before being ultimately assured.

The problem of theorizing bodily signification in cinema becomes even more pronounced in relation to the "fantastical" body, particularly in the horror and super-hero genres. These comprise, on the one hand, the *preternatural* body – vampires, werewolves, zombies, angels, and so forth – and, on the other, the hyper-endowed, *super*-body – whether hero or villain. The latter category is slightly more complex insofar as, first, many such characters, such as Daredevil or Professor X, have bodies that would conventionally be considered 'impaired' – and, second, the distinction between technologically enhanced *cyber*-bodies – Robocop, Iron Man – and the physically altered or different, those who have or acquire superhuman powers – Spiderman, Superman, the Hulk – is difficult, and perhaps impossible to draw. However, neither the preternatural nor super-body is routinely incorporated into cinematic or literary analysis from the perspective of disability studies –

with the very notable exception of the analyses which Angela Smith offers in her book. This problem is usually evinced in the opposite direction where general cinematic studies of the fantastical body are invariably impoverished in relation to any demonstrable awareness and use of insights from disability studies.[4] The various offerings on the narrative of Frankenstein are almost the only regular point of mutual contact.

In spite of this, we do not have to look far in order to see the potential for fruitful crossover. In a review of Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop,* Julie Codell observes,

> Robocop's body is the nexus of hi-tech production and of consumerism as an end-in-itself. His body focuses a wide range of literal and metaphoric body imagery, expanding into the total corpus: the human body, the corporate body, the body politic, the social body.

Although the character of Murphy, and his monstrous incarnation as Robocop, rest on his massively impaired, not to say, dead, body, Codell's comment points to the possibility of an elaborated view of narrative prosthesis. Firstly, however, any such approach would not favor any one dimension of corporeality over any other. Secondly, it would incorporate a more semiotically informed approach, in which bodily difference is much more commonly a signifying than signified element. Thirdly, such an approach would recognize in its symbolic analyses the theoretical identity of putatively "real" abnormality, as well as the fantastical and monstrous. Fourthly, it would avoid the generalizing temptation to produce theories that take as their premise the assumption that all instances of portrayed bodily difference would fit a single pattern. And, fifthly, it would anticipate the overdetermination of signified elements.

[4] For example, see the otherwise excellent Judith Halberstam.

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